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ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a movement to put religion and its influence on history back into the social studies curriculum. This ERIC Digest discusses: (1) reasons for including religion in the curriculum; (2) how religion is currently treated in the school curriculum; (3) guidelines for teaching religion in the classroom; and (4) resources available to implement in the curriculum. Religion is an active force in today's world, and for students to understand U.S. history and culture and the schisms in Ireland, the Middle East, and Afghanistan, for example, a thorough comprehension of religion is necessary. Citing the Supreme Court decisions written on Engle v. Vitale (1962) and Abington v. Schempp (1963) to support religion as an integral part of the curriculum, teachers, administrators, and schoolboards are cited as barriers in their efforts to avoid controversy within the community. However, if guidelines are established, teaching religion can be included in the curriculum without public outcry. Some guidelines include the study of religion without practicing, imposing viewpoints, or converting to any particular religion and the infusion of accepted methods and materials while providing a balanced understanding of culture, society, and religion. Resources are available to aid teachers in teaching about religion while staying with the U.S. Supreme Court guidelines. An 11-item reference and ERIC resource list is included. (DJC)

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by

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by C. Frederick Risinger

In this era of educational reform, the social studies curriculum has been a frequent target of critics representing every point on the political spectrum. While educators argue that history is neglected and traditional values are missing, others contend that the curriculum lacks social relevance and avoids significant public issues. Most agree, however, that religion is not adequately included in the social studies curriculum. They argue that teachers, administrators, school boards, and textbook publishers have tended to strip social studies courses of all but the most bland references to religion as a social force in the past and present. As a result, students are prevented from learning in school about one of the most significant factors in human societies from the prehistoric era to the world today.

Religion is a major force in human affairs and, as such, should be included in the social studies curriculum. This ERIC Digest examines (1) reasons for including religion in the curriculum; (2) the current status of religious studies in the schools; (3) guidelines for including religion in the social studies curriculum; and (4) ideas for teaching about religion in the social studies.

Why Should Religion Be in the Curriculum? It is impossible to understand much of history without knowing about religion. For example, the schism between Roman and Byzantine Christianity changed the course of Europe. The growth of European nation-states is inextricably linked to the Protestant Reformation. The European voyages of exploration were fueled by religious as well as commercial concerns. Religious motives moved Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand to find resources for Columbus right after the Muslim Moors and Sephardic Jews were driven from southern Spain.

In today's world, the influence of religion continues to be significant. For instance, disputes in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and Afghanistan have religious roots. Rising nationalism tied to religion threatens political stability in the Soviet Union, while Christian fundamentalists have been a major force in American politics.

If students are to comprehend and interpret their world, they must learn about religion and its influence on civilizations of the past and present. If students are to know and value their American civilization, they must learn about the Judaic-Christian underpinnings of their heritage. Indeed, if students are to achieve a reasonable level of cultural literacy, they must be able to identify and appreciate the religious qualities at the core of our mainstream American culture.

What is the Current Status of Religion in the School Curriculum? Textbook coverage of religion in American history is deficient. While religion's influence in the early settlement of the United States is included in most textbooks, it vanishes soon after the colonial period. The role of religious leaders in the struggle against slavery, the significance of the church as a force among Black Americans after the Civil War and among immigrant groups in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and the importance of religion in every protest and reform movement in American history is down-played in textbooks and state-level curriculum guides.

For most social studies teachers, teaching about religion conjures up thoughts of local ministers and parents visiting the school to demand that the teacher stop or even resign. Many teachers and administrators argue that including religion in the curriculum is unconstitutional and point to two famous Supreme Court decisions (*Engle vs. Vitale, 1962*) and (*Abington vs. Schempp, 1963*) as proof. These two cases, however, provide solid legal and intellectual support for teaching about religion in social studies classes. The keyword in this issue is *about*. In applying the establishment clause of the First Amendment, the Court has carefully and consistently walked a narrow path. While these decisions do prohibit Bible reading, school-sponsored morning devotions, and prayers, they do not prevent teachers from teaching about religion as a significant force in human affairs. Several of the justices went out of their way to prescribe that teaching about religion is important in schools. In his majority opinion, Justice Tom Clark said, "It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion and its relation to the advance of civilization." Justice William Brennan, in a concurring opinion, held that "whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion."

Certainly, the courts have not banned teaching about religion from the schools. What has been proscribed is the sponsorship of any specific religious belief or the practice of any ceremony that is part of a particular religion or sect. In recent years, a few small groups have maintained that by eliminating all references to religion in the schools, educators are teaching a religion of "secular humanism." The courts have not agreed with this view and have continued to uphold the opinions previously described. Currently, the primary barrier for including religion's role throughout history and in the contemporary world in the curriculum is one that teachers, administrators, and schoolboards have erected—a barrier based on the desire to avoid controversy. However, if appropriate guidelines are followed, teaching about religion can be included in the curriculum without raising a storm of protest within the local community.

What are Some Guidelines for Teaching about Religion? Several organizations have been active over the past decade in

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attempts to give religion its proper place in the curriculum. These groups include professional social studies organizations, professional administrative organizations, university-based centers, and private groups that encourage an objective, non-sectarian approach. Each has developed guidelines and recommendations for bringing religion into the curriculum. Some have developed guides and curriculum materials for both teachers and administrators. These materials differ somewhat but are quite similar in purpose and content. Some of the more common guidelines are summarized below:

- The school may sponsor the study of religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion.
- Schools may expose the students to all religions' views, but may not impose any particular view.
- The purpose of teaching about religion is to educate about all religions, not to convert students to any specific religious view.
- Study about religion should strive for awareness and understanding of the diversity of religions, religious experiences, religious expressions, and the reasons for particular expressions of religious beliefs within a society or culture.
- Study about religion should be academically responsible and pedagogically sound, utilizing accepted methods and materials of the social sciences and the humanities.
- Discussion should be centered on the critical role of religion in human culture and on its importance therein for a balanced understanding of civilization and society.
- Religious leaders and other community leaders, along with educators, should contribute to discussions of the role of religion in the curriculum.
- State-level departments of education should develop guidelines for integrating religion into the social studies curriculum to provide support for local schools.
- Textbook selection committees at the state and local levels should require adequate treatment of religion in all curriculum materials.

What Resources and Ideas are Available for Implementing Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum? Because of the neglect of religion as an essential topic within the social studies curriculum, many teachers are uneasy about their ability to teach it. Therefore, for both preservice and inservice teachers, efforts to assist them in learning content as well as effective strategies are essential.

Outstanding teacher training and excellent materials on comparative world religions are available from the World Religions Curriculum Development Center in Minneapolis. This center provides consultative assistance and has developed a one-semester course on religion and human culture. Its components can be used separately as well as in other courses. The National Council on Religion and Public Education at the University of Kansas also provides assistance to schools who wish to teach about religion while staying within the guidelines established by the Supreme Court.

Several educational administration organizations have made improvement of education about religion a high-priority goal. Long before it became a trend, the American Association of School Administrators in 1964 promoted education about religion. Recently, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development established a special panel that has developed a comprehensive and useful report, *Religion in the Curriculum*. Phi Delta Kappa has also published a helpful booklet, *Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools*, as part of its Fastback Series. It contains specific guidelines for teaching about religion in the social studies. The new *California Framework for History-Social Science Education* gives far more emphasis to the role of religion in human societies than do other curriculum guides.

Integrating the study about religion in the social studies curriculum is a relatively easy task once the commitment has been made. Obviously, world history and U.S. history provide a broad "theater" within which religion plays a significant role. But a presentation of U.S. government, sociology, and even economics is inadequate if the role of religion is omitted. For example, one Chicago suburban high school included a nine-week unit about religion as a part of a required world history course. Students learned that religion was a "cultural universal" and studied about religion in prehistoric times and in the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India. Other topics included the relationship among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Connecticut and California elective one-semester courses are among the schools' most popular courses. Both programs are comparative religion courses that emphasize diversity and understanding of religious beliefs and the practice of religion in the contemporary world. Likewise, the opportunities to discuss the role of religion in elementary social studies are numerous. In community studies, state history, and other topics, the impact of religion on individuals and societies can be observed and examined.

Throughout the United States, some schools and individual teachers are providing their students with a balanced, comprehensive view of religion in human culture. Still, the fact that nearly all social studies textbooks and state curriculum guides ignore or gloss over religion is evidence that most schools should review their current practices and determine how best to include this important topic in their curriculum.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources, including references used to prepare this Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304, or call 1-800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (*Current Index to Journals in Education*) which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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